

Legal office works hard to serve Rhein-Main

By Airman 1st Class
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The saying "Do more with less" can be applied to many offices on base, and the Rhein-Main Legal Office is no exception. The legal office has a large amount of responsibility and job duties, as a result, the personnel must use great teamwork and knowledge to provide service to the community.

The office is much smaller than most of its counterparts at other bases. Thus, the personnel must learn how to perform multiple tasks.

"We have to all be able to cover each other's areas, and everybody has to be able to fill the different shoes of every division in the office," said Lt. Col. Dawn Eflein, staff judge advocate.

So whether it is a lawyer who needs help with research, or a secretary who needs someone to cover the desk, the personnel find a way to make it happen. "It doesn't matter what the task is, everybody, regardless of rank, will jump in and help each other out," said Tech. Sgt. Chris Hernandez, law office manager.

The legal office consists of nine personnel. There are three attorneys, four paralegals, a civilian host-nation advisor and a secretary.

They are responsible for many different areas, including: operations law issues, claims, labor issues, environmental issues, military justice, courts martial, article 15s, discharges, civil-law issues, contracts, international law, ethics issues and more.

"We cover a wide gamut of areas," Eflein said.

As staff judge advocate, Eflein has an enormous amount of responsibility. She advises the unit commanders on all issues that affect their troops, and on all other legal matters that deal with the base. This includes base closure issues and working with the Frankfurt International Airport.

The main responsibilities of the lawyers include giving legal advice to the entire base community and retirees who live in the area, preparing legal documents and acting as prosecutors during courts-martial.



Photo By Airman 1st Class Andrew Rouleau

Tech. Sgt. Chris Hernandez and Staff Sgt. Rita Pilialoha, paralegals in the law office, execute an airman's Will before he leaves for TDY.

A few of the paralegals duties include legal research, the notarization of documents, conducting witness interviews and giving legal briefings.

An area with one of the highest workloads is claims. When a person files a claim, they go to the law office and meet with a paralegal. The paralegal assesses the damage, investigates and adjudicates the claim. The claim is then sent to a settlement authority in the office. Hernandez said that most claims involve damage to personal property during household goods shipments. According to legal officials, the legal office has processed 109 claims this past fiscal year, a 28 percent increase over last year. It also collected \$39,000 in recovery claims, a 49 percent increase over last year.

There are two responsibilities of the law office that have increased significantly in recent weeks.

"Right now, especially since Sept. 11, we have had a big influx in people wanting to do Wills and Powers-of-Attorney," Eflein said.

The office has prepared and executed more than 62 Wills this year, and have seen a 47 percent increase since Sept. 11.

Being in Germany, Rhein-Main needs

a resource for advice and reference relating with country-specific issues, which is why there is a host-nation advisor in the legal office.

Ernst Zchiesche, the host-nation advisor, assists personnel with any German law questions. He occasionally helps as a translator for the commander, and helps the commander and staff agencies with any official concerns dealing with German and American involvement.

With such a large scope of responsibilities, the work in the legal office can be difficult. "The biggest challenge we have is ensuring that we can provide the base and the commanders the full array of legal services all of the time, in spite of different issues, such as losing someone on temporary duty," Eflein said.

While the job may be straining at times, the legal personnel feel they have one of the best jobs in the Air Force.

"It is a constant learning environment," Hernandez said. "It is a very demanding job, but it is a very fulfilling job."

"It never gets boring because there is always something new and different," Eflein said.

Any AF personnel interested in retraining into the law field can call 330-7275.